

DRAFT

**Full Communion and the Disciples of Christ:
Some Brief Reflections**

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Introduction

In preparing these brief reflections on full communion and the Disciples of Christ, I had the benefit of having read several texts that had been written for this study of the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, including the statements by O.C. Edwards, Hermann Weinlick and others. I found their papers to be instructive and helpful in identifying several issues surrounding the understandings and practice of “full communion” as a model in our search for visible unity. Indeed, I affirm many of their basic insights regarding both the value of this model for moving churches towards greater oneness in Christ, as well as naming some of the limitations and shortcomings that full communion has introduced into the ecumenical life of the churches today. From my perspective, the major concern is that a “full communion relationship” is too often seen and/or treated as the end or conclusion of a process, rather than a step along the road in moving the churches forward in realization of the goal of full visible unity in Christ.

Understanding “Full Communion” in the Disciples

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) participates in one “full communion” relationship: the Ecumenical Partnership between the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ; and, we are a full member of Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) that represents a new ecumenical relationship that is committed to achieving “full communion” among its nine member communions. The enabling documents and theological statements that have led us in our General Assemblies to approve both of these ecumenical initiatives are excellent statements, spelling out the grounding of the relationship in God’s gift of unity in Christ and the areas of commitment that will mark the growing relationships in the future.

In reading several “full communion” agreements, it seems to me that the foundational understandings are basically the same for each of the relationships; it is the partners that are different. And, with different partners that bring different histories, ecclesiologies and “gifts,” each of the agreements also includes areas of specificity and nuance that begins to enrich the whole concept of “full communion.” However, the commonality is greater than the difference in identifying what makes for a “full communion” relationship – both nationally, and in our international agreements.

Let me illustrate by sharing some of foundational statements the Disciples and the UCC spelled out as key understandings in our partnership that developed out of “the changing nature of both the goal of the unity we seek as well as the approach to that goal in its changing forms and shapes.” There were seven understandings that we jointly acknowledged – understandings that I find in common with all “full communion” initiatives:

- In the search for unity, the emphasis is not upon an organizational merger of our separate structures, but upon a more faithful witness, service, fellowship, worship and proclamation of our common faith;
- The unity we seek is not something we create, but comes as a gift; it does not depend upon our like-mindedness, nor is it destroyed by our diversity;
- The unity we seek is centered in the Eucharistic gathering of the community around the one Table, which is the place where the church and the world intersect in the presence of Christ, and the place from which Christians are sent forth to serve and to love;
- The unity we seek is focused upon active participation in the mission of the church to overcome brokenness, alienation, and separation among all peoples;
- The unity we seek must include ways for Christians to take active responsibility for one another and to make basic decisions together that guide their worship, witness and service;
- The path to unity is neither a detailed map to follow nor a blueprint from which we work; rather, the road to unity is primarily a faith journey into the future in which, only when the first steps have been taken, will the next stage become clear; and,
- All efforts in the ecumenical movement must support and contribute to each other in making the gift of unity visible where it has been obscured, in maintaining it where it is threatened, and in recovering it where it has been lost.

In addition to these foundational understandings, the specific goal of “full communion” for the Disciples was described in language that was hoped would make this model more accessible to a wider audience within our church: language that made a distinction between the focus of earlier generations in identifying unity in terms of creating a single structure and the proposal of “full communion” as a model appropriate for this time (and this generation) that signaled a new approach to church union in three ways:

“First, the focus of ‘full communion’ is on the kernel rather than the husk – on faith, worship, ministry, and mission, not structure and denominational identity. The emphasis to put it another way is on shared life not merged structures.

Second, ‘full communion’ is oriented more toward the future than the past. Previous models of unity depended heavily on negotiations, aimed at achieving a common structure or common practice or common statement of faith, based upon what the churches involved did or thought in the past. ‘Full communion’, on the other hand, should be understood as a commitment to envision together what we are called to become.

Third, ‘full communion’, by design, is not a ‘top-down’ effort. The real initiative must come from congregations and regions and conferences where members of the church determine what it means in their circumstances to give flesh to our partnership in the gospel. . . ‘Full communion’ may not be so clear cut as previous models and approaches to unity, but perhaps that is good. It requires us to live with trust, in an open-ended process.”

And, in concluding the description of “full communion” it was always set within the context of looking to and enabling the wider unity of the whole church – whether in our relationships within the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) or in our dialogues and partnerships with other Christians and communions in the universal church.

Not much original or uniquely Disciples here! Full communion, wherever it is described, celebrated, or practiced seems to bear essentially these same basic marks, understandings, and commitments.

Insights about and Challenges to “Full Communion” in the future

In my own experience of how “full communion” is lived out in our ecumenical partnership (with the United Church of Christ) and in the new relationship of CUIC that looks forward to establishing a “full communion” relationship as it completes its work on the recognition and reconciliation of ordained ministries (the final piece to be put in place), *and* in my reading of the “full communion” agreements that have been consummated and in observing how those too are lived out in the life of the churches involved, I have identified six issues and challenges that I believe must be taken seriously by the churches – and by the ecumenical movement itself – if this model is to prove to be a true avenue in moving the churches forward in reaching the goal of full visible unity, and not a dead-end *cul de sac* of spinning wheels in a comfortable neighborhood.

First, the greatest challenge appears to be in moving the relationship beyond the official votes, and enabling actions, and worshipful celebrations into the real life and realities of church-life for all of the communions, beginning with their congregations and parishes, but including (and sometimes naming as the “bottle-neck”) the middle judicatories and national structures. How is “full communion” lived out in the local community in a way that outsiders might understand that the churches involved are no longer separate, but are witnessing to their full unity in Christ?

Second, a second challenge is in finding the ecumenical center of the various “full communion” agreements, and not seeing them as new ways to live out our separate and divided lives as Christians and churches (even sometimes with one “full communion” relationship being lifted up as ‘more important’ than other similar relationships involving different partners). For example, Disciples are in “full communion” with the UCC, who is involved in “full communion” with other Reformed churches and the ELCA, who is in

a “full communion” relationship with the Episcopal Church. Are there not implications that cut across all of these relationships?

Third, there is the real challenge that many persons in all of our churches understanding that the “full communion” relationships are, in fact, the ultimate goal of visible unity – but it does not really make a significant difference in any of the practical ways we live as churches or congregations. We need to re-visit the discussion of the goal of the unity we seek, and ask if different communions have opted for “full communion” as that ultimate goal when others (even some engaged in a “full communion” relationship with those same communions) see it a step or stage along the way.

Fourth, as Lydia Veliko identified in her paper, I see the problem that “full communion” relationships “can be engaged or ignored at will” – lacking any significant accountability, either within one’s own communion, and especially, between the full communion partners. Should that element of accountability be more clearly spelled out in practical terms as a vital aspect of any “full communion” relationship?

Fifth, at the heart of all “full communion” agreements (at least as I see and understand how all of the churches here in the US essentially function) is that they are finally dependent upon the concept of congregational autonomy: “No one can tell us what we have to do!” The challenge is to “take on” the concept of autonomy that drives so much of church life in our nation. It is not a biblical or theological concept, but it often drives (or prevents!) any ecumenical advance. Is this a topic that needs to be picked up by the Faith and Order Commission of the NCCC?

Finally, I believe the way forward in bringing our full communion agreements to fruition will not happen because we can give better definition, or theological grounding, or even dynamic vision to the concept and its role in relation to fulfilling the unity of Christ’s followers that was at the heart of Jesus’ prayer in John 17. We have “been there and done that!” (see the statements on understandings of “full communion” quoted above) Rather, what I believe is needed is for all of the churches in “full communion” to being with a common confession of the sin of our division and our (active) participation in that sin! If we truly believe division is sin, then we will act on that sin – in confession, in our worship, in service to the needy, in witness to the gospel, in proclamation to the world. This element, I believe, is lacking in our proposals of “full communion”, and yet, acknowledgment and common confession of our sin of division may provide our best hope for the future.